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Re-imagined universities and global citizen professionals: International education, cosmopolitan pedagogies and global friendships

by Shanti George

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

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As the title suggests, this book is a collection of ideas, gleaned from the author's own experience and that of participants in two studies conducted in the 1990s, on the nature of schools of development studies, on the hegemony of 'conventional' universities, on the impact of neo-liberalism on higher education, on transformative pedagogies, and on friendships that cross cultures and continents. These ideas, and the book, are united by an overarching belief that universities need to be transformed, to become institutions that value different ways of knowing and that actively work towards the reduction of global injustice and inequity.

The first chapter sets the scene for the remainder of the volume, and presents the overarching theme - that schools of development studies have something to teach conventional universities about emancipatory (as opposed to capitalist) cosmopolitanism. The approach to be taken, the chapter explains, is to explore this issue through the voices of what are referred to as 'citizen professionals': intellectuals from developing countries who have sought an international education in Europe with a view to bringing about social change in their own countries. At the same time, it is made clear that the individuals concerned are also of intrinsic interest, as the book intends to address questions about what it means to be a citizen professional in a developing country, what their experiences and perceptions are, and what we know about their 'life circumstances, career choices, professional activities and inner lives' (p. 4). These strands, we are told, are to be combined in a process that 'interweaves ethnography with theory and comparative material' (p. 36).

Chapter 2 introduces the backgrounds to the citizen professionals who provided the data for the study. A total of 124 'life narratives' were generated, with a sub-group of 12 individuals selected from class representatives of the development studies courses in which they were enrolled. They are described as the offspring of members of a pre-existing privileged class, with which they had clashed as they became aware of the inequities with which they were surrounded, developing a determination to do something to change the status quo. Thus, they are motivated by consideration for the oppressed, rather than rebellion against their own experienced discrimination. They are presented as people who are torn: desiring both to do good and to live comfortable lives; critiquing the status quo but aware that their privileged education has created opportunities and networks that would otherwise not have been available to them.

The third chapter, which sets out to present the narratives of the sub-group of 12, is a key component of the book, but is also rather confusing. It commences by listing the 12 by pseudonym, where they are from and what they do. Additionally and oddly, considering the *Weltanschauung* adopted in the book, the list also identifies all but one of the female participants by gender (e.g. 'woman environmentalist ... woman economist' (p. 88)), leaving the impression that being male is the default position. Trivial in itself, it is one of a number of aberrations that cause the reader to pause and reflect on the overall coherence of the case being made. There follow three of the participants' narratives, presented as chronological life stories. Unexpectedly, this approach is then curtailed and the chapter shifts structure, continuing under a series of abstract headings and sub-headings, such as 'time' and 'a multi-vocal science'. The logic that underpins this organisation and its

content is elusive. Its conclusion states that the chapter has revealed 'the construction of a narrative of self' (p. 124), but the impression left is one of fractured ideas that have yet to find a common thread.

In Chapter 4 the case is presented for how 'conventional' universities can learn from schools of development studies, or more precisely from a specific school located in Holland. This institution attracts students who bring with them tacit knowledge of their own societies which is then absorbed into what becomes a genuinely global curriculum. The learning environment, it is argued, is therefore one of self-education and collective knowledge construction between staff and students. Chapter 5 then moves beyond the classroom to explore the informal experience of the students, in the process comparing the cosmopolitan and supportive personal relationships developed at the school of development studies that was the site for the study with those at self-styled 'world class universities' which, it is claimed, 'tend to parallel, reflect and reinforce hierarchies and hegemonies' (p. 165).

Chapter 6 moves away from the studies that informed the rest of the book to present a narrative of a tragedy involving two Harvard students, one from Vietnam and one from Ethiopia. It is included to provide a stark and vivid contrast with the world of the preceding chapters. This it does, not least because of the drama of the story itself. The book's final chapter reiterates the main argument that conventional universities can learn much from schools of development studies: about interdisciplinarity and multiple methodologies, about the creation of a culture of critical discourse; about pedagogical approaches, and about facilitating supportive personal relationships.

There is much to admire about this book. Shanti George has shone a light on a group of people whose lives and experiences are rarely documented in the extensive literature on international higher education, and her findings enrich our knowledge and understanding. At the same time, the book is also frustrating because of its tendency to present the current situation within the two types of institution in baldly dichotomous terms, even while simultaneously describing university courses that have moved in the direction she advocates. There are attempts at even-handedness, as for example when it is stated that the deaths at Harvard may not have taken place in a 'less ruthlessly competitive' subject than pre-medical biology (p. 227) and that suicides in schools of development studies also need investigation. But the author does not name the subjects that are less competitive, nor does she investigate student deaths outside Harvard, and these asides look like lip service – because ultimately what she has done is to take an outlier (by her own description) school of development studies and compare it with one of the greatest bastions of established power in the most powerful neo-liberal country in the world. The conclusion from this comparison that the programmes and support they offer are rather different in nature is unsurprising, and the suggestion on the basis of the evidence presented that one should consider being more like the other fails to take into account a whole raft of factors that do not appear in this book.

The author acknowledges that her study's results from a non-representative sample in a single institution should not be generalised and that she is, rather, seeking insights from its students' experiences. This is done well, and it could be argued that the points that emerge from her study should have been allowed to stand by themselves, to sensitise readers to alternative ways of approaching international education than those which are most frequently reported in the literature. Perhaps she over-eggs the pudding both with some broad generalisations about the nature of universities, which she refers to as 'ivory towers'; and also with the inclusion of a horrific incident at one of these universities which is included because it has 'potential to illuminate' (p. 191) not only the university's own practices but, it is claimed, an entire society.

It is salient that conventional universities were not investigated in the studies on which this book reports, but that the comments about these institutions are based on the literature. In spite of the previous criticisms, this is what ultimately demonstrates what this book has to offer. Shanti George appears to have built a picture of what is going on in universities from a mass of literature that identifies international students as tools of a neo-liberal agenda, but ultimately this sweeping viewpoint contrasts with her own informed description of some of the specific courses in development studies that are currently conducted in departments of conventional universities. This book has, therefore, something to offer not only in its study of a group of citizen professionals striving to make the world a better place, but also in illustrating transformational practices that take place in international higher education but which are infrequently the subject of this type of literature.